

Linda Chhath
Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship report
Summer Travel Grant (2013)
Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, Cambodia

Thanks to generous funding from the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Summer Travel Grant, I was able to conduct preliminary dissertation research in Cambodia in order to test the feasibility of my proposed dissertation project. I started wanting to trace the activities of Khmer Buddhists and their interactions with transnational Buddhist networks in order to unravel the ways in which cosmopolitan ideologies worked its way into Cambodia's nation building project. I was attracted to doing a dissertation project on Buddhism in the pre-war period in Cambodia because I knew that the period between decolonization and the Civil War is now regarded as the golden era of modern Khmer cultural productivity. The art, architecture and ethical teachings and moral codes that were produced and consolidated during this period are seen by contemporary Cambodians as being modern Khmer culture and cultural production at its height. While I went to Cambodia with this understanding in mind, it was not until I was there and immersed in the current social, political and economic space of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap did I really appreciate why this sentiment is so pervasive, even among Cambodia's youth.

Due to the flourishing tourism industry and relative political stability in the past decade, Cambodia is currently experiencing fast-paced economic and social transformation, which includes a development boom as well as the adoption of global trends in art, music, films, fashion, food and culture. For me, the starkest example of the present state of "change" is the current position of the Buddhist Institute. Once a flourishing center of Buddhist intellectual research and learning in the post-independence period through the early 1970s, the Institute now sits next to a brand new amusement park and its grounds serve as the unofficial parking lot of the enormous Naga World Hotel and Casino complex, which literally casts a shadow on it from behind. The juxtaposition of the Buddhist Institute, Naga World and the Amusement Park, stands as a visual and physical representation of current Khmer anxieties about the perceived "morally corrupt" present, eclipsing and erasing the revered cultural, moral and artistic integrity of the past.

Having returned from my short research survey trip in Cambodia, I have gained invaluable insights into the challenges and avenues for further expansion in my long term field work. I started my work in archives where I was able to find a number of fruitful collections housing documents on conferences, speeches, international events and Buddhist celebrations pertaining to cosmopolitan solidarities, which to my knowledge have been left largely ignored and cannot be accessed outside of Cambodia. While the archival materials are rich, I was surprised to find that the nostalgia for the pre-war period in Cambodia has opened up access to various types of sources and products from this era that I had not considered accessible previously. There are currently numerous publications, art exhibitions and documentary works mounted in Cambodia by those who have sought to revive interest in, and preserve the intellectual and artistic relics of this era. This summer I was able to tap into these works and

public events to help me identify individuals and other resources such as films, photographs and publications. While official documents on the Buddha Jayanti, the World Fellowship of Buddhists and other international Buddhist events are the most accessible, my preliminary research revealed that other sources including Buddhist and popular periodicals, political cartoons, popular films, newsreel, and copies of Buddhist sermons and radio broadcasts from the period are now accessible in markets, and vending stalls set up outside of temples. These sources will allow me to avoid a project that utilizes only “top-down” official documents.

This pre-dissertation research has helped me narrow my project by impressing upon me the utility and importance of material cultural production in Cambodia during this era in transmitting locally, the social, political and ethical discourses that were circulating globally. My current project, which I situate at the interstices of the fields of religious studies, Southeast Asian history and Theravada Buddhist history, seeks to examine the ways in which Khmer intellectuals, artists and modernizers used Buddhist ethics as a medium for expressing and shaping a new internationalism, and in turn how this new internationalism entered into Buddhist and popular moral discourses during the 1950s and 1960s. Given that Buddhism provided a vital resource in Cambodia’s projects of defining sovereignty and instituting social and political stability, the project’s aim is to present a historical account of the postcolonial experiences in Cambodia through the lens of prevailing media and material culture, which drew its inspiration and expression from Buddhist ethical discourses. In Cambodia, I propose that the kinds of ethical and moral teachings disseminated by politicians, intellectuals and Buddhist clergy in the pre-war period took shape within a cosmopolitan context, which began to metastasize in the second half of the twentieth century.

While I argue that a cosmopolitan Buddhist *imaginaire* expanded in the second half the 20th century, I don’t want to misrepresent Khmer Buddhism as having been “provincial” previously, after all the intellectual lineage of the transnational Dhammayut reforms of the late 19th and early 20th century highly informed Khmer ethical conversations of the ‘50s and ‘60s. However beginning in the period just prior to decolonization, I see a shift in “Buddhist cosmopolitanism” related to developments in technologies and methods of ethical transmission, which made Buddhist ethical conversations publicly accessible, thus enabling the creation of popular ethical expressions as seen in the types of material produce being examined in my research. The 1950s and ‘60s in Cambodia under the rule of Norodom Sihanouk’s Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime, is understood by contemporary Khmer as a “golden era” of cultural expression including Buddhism, architecture, music, and film. In spite of the importance of this period in Cambodia for understanding pan-Asian Buddhist networks and modernist movements, as well as the trajectories that propelled Cambodia into deeper involvement in global Cold War politics and their outcomes, there is no scholarly monograph to date that investigates Khmer Buddhism during these decades. Placing emphasis on religious renewal and ethical developments in Cambodia during this period, I take into account the Theravada scholar Charles Hallisey’s assertion that large scale processes of colonialism, modernity and globalization have profoundly

shaped Buddhist moral experience, values and practice, while setting in motion novel trajectories in Buddhist ethics. These trajectories resulted from Buddhist encounters with ideas and values which have historically been outside of the Buddhist world and by shared assumptions and institutions, which broadly structure social life and understandings of social life. He argues that these trajectories come together to form what he terms “ethical creoles” in which Buddhist vocabulary is utilized to express modern ethical understandings or in which modern moral vocabularies are utilized to express traditional Buddhist moral and ethical values and practices. (Hallisey 2005: 313) Ethics in the context of this research is thinking and talking about the values, ideas, and practices of morality within social contexts.

In preparation for my long-term dissertation research I have established an affiliation with *Paññāsāstra* University of Cambodia, where I will work closely with the President of the University, Dr. Kol Pheng, who will serve as my academic advisor during my tenure as a PUC affiliate. Establishing this relationship was perhaps the most exciting step forward in my research because PUC is an institution that incorporates the tenets of Khmer cosmopolitan Buddhist ethics that I will seek to explore in my research, stating in their mission statement that “PUC strives to deliver quality education that is attainable by, and responsive to the needs of the people of Cambodia and that of the global community. We place special emphasis on quality research based education, studies of peace, conflict resolution, development, moral and ethical conducts as well as social responsibility.” (<http://www.puc.edu.kh/index.php/about-puc>) As such, I foresee my future work with Dr. Kol Pheng as an avenue for expanding my intellectual network in Cambodia as well as open my access to sources that I have yet to explore as a non-affiliated pre-dissertator.